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Just What a Young Man Ought To Be: Politeness and easy manners as the infallible passport in Austen's Pride and Prejudice

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Among the misinterpreted ideas about the Regency era is the concept that women were more confined to etiquette than men. However, upon closer inspection, it's clear that this quality of being 'amiable' (likable, friendly, sensitive, even lovable) in the Regency culture was crucial to almost every person of any status or social position regardless of gender. Austen's novel reflects this, for example, in the attitude of the community as a whole (including the Bennets) toward both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, but the stronger reaction is toward Darcy. The conclusion that the gathered people have of him is that he is awkward and arrogant. He is unwilling to dance unless he is acquainted with his partner, suggesting to everyone present that he is unable to make polite conversation, and yet his refusal to become acquainted with any of the women in the room suggests that he is too arrogant to do so. In addition, there is textual evidence that indicates that he means Elizabeth to overhear his judgment of her as 'intolerable'. A refusal of this nature to adhere to the conventional forms of manners and politeness results in his being utterly dismissed from the good graces of everyone present.

"Mr. Darcy danced only once with Mrs. Hurst and once with Miss Bingley, declined to be introduced to any other lady, and spent the rest of the evening walking about the room, speaking occasionally to one of his own party. His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and every body hoped that he would never come there again" (Austen 40).

"Politeness and easy manners are the infallible passport to secure and agreeable and familiar footing among [women]. To individuals of this description their doors are ever open" (Andrews 2).

In contrast, Mr. Bingley is said by Jane to be "just what a young man ought to be…sensible, good humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners! – so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!" (Austen 45), signaling the stress that is put on politeness and manners when referencing a person's whole being. Manners are habits indicating good breeding, with overtones extending to a person's moral character. Likewise, arrogance or perceived rudeness are immediately suspected to reveal a less savory moral character, regardless of financial or social status. It should be noted, for example, that no matter how Elizabeth's character may defy the conventions of her day, she maintains her manners and her politeness, even during her arguments with others. Mr. Darcy's main defect, then, is a lack of manners, which reveal (or are maybe brought on by) his perceived amount of pride and arrogance.

This portrait by G. M. Woodward (*Curtesy 1797)* is actually two images on a single plate, satirizing with some remarkable detail the complexity of the manners and politeness that most people were expected to know. The top shows two men bowing to one another at a prescribed angle to indicate their social statues in reference to each other. The bottom shows similar rules for the curtseys of the women and their social relationship. The precise angles of the bows and curtseys may or may not be recorded as numbers within the drawing itself, but the satire of manners shown here is made plain by the lines and facial expressions of the characters.

However, the criticism of women and their etiquette was still prevalent. In typical Regency fashion, although men were oft criticized for their manners (or lack thereof), French and English women were often compared to one another in various ways, not the least of which was their conduct toward men. John Andrews, in his *Remarks on French and English Ladies* (1783), described the English women as possessing "qualities of candor, discretion, modesty, and the other countless ornaments of an English woman's character" (59) while critiquing "the more splendid, though less amiable qualifications of wit, vivacity, sprightliness of humor and deportment, that embellish the whole system of so many French ladies" (59).

Andrews, *Remarks on the French and English ladies*, Dublin, 1783
Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, London, 1813
Woodward, *Curtesy*, London, May 26, 1797

"As they are generally keen and intelligent, and almost always in the upper lift of domestics, they avail themselves with amazing dexterity of every opportunity to render themselves of some significance. As they are extremely attached to their country, and all that belongs to it, they are ever extolling its methods and manners of acting and living, and lose no occasion of introducing them, whenever the least opening offers" (Andrews 36).